Design Guide 15

Conversion of Agricultural Buildings

15.1 CONVERSION OF AGRICULTURAL BUILDINGS

Traditional agricultural buildings are a conspicuous and precious feature of the settlements and landscapes of West Oxfordshire. The best possible use for these buildings is the one for which they were originally designed.

However, in the event that they become redundant as agricultural buildings, appropriate new uses may sometimes be found to secure their conservation and continued utility.

Where planning permission is required for the change of use or for alterations, the Council's primary objective will be to secure the preservation of the agricultural building and its meaningful contribution to the character of the surrounding area.

While local and national planning policies generally encourage the re-use of existing buildings, a residential use can entail more extensive internal and external alterations to the building, and more radical changes to its setting than other uses.

Whether Listed or non-designated, agricultural buildings are protected by policies intended to protect their agricultural character. Fundamental to any planning judgment relating to an existing agricultural building or its setting will be the question: what will be the likely impact of the proposed changes on the established agricultural character of the building or its setting?

If the agricultural character is likely to be substantially eroded or lost altogether – particularly if the building is Listed – then conversion may not be acceptable in principle.

15.2 TYPES OF AGRICULTURAL BUILDING

Proposals involving agricultural buildings should begin with a thorough understanding of the historical use and architectural character of the building, and of its setting. The various functions of different types of agricultural building manifest themselves in a distinctive combination of form, size and detailing particular to each type – characteristics that must be recognised and protected in any conversion.

Barns were built for the storage of produce and equipment. Some were also used for processing produce, including the threshing of grain. They are generally rectangular in plan with large cart openings. These openings are usually placed centrally in the flanking walls, but may be placed off-centre, and sometimes occupy projecting gabled or hipped bays. Walls do not generally have other openings (except perhaps ventilation slots). Roofs slopes are generally unbroken, with no openings.

Fig. 1 Traditional field barn

Cart Sheds and Stables were built to house equipment and animals, and vary in size and form. They may be free-standing, attached to other buildings, or form a linking range in a courtyard group. They generally have a number of open bays divided by timber posts or masonry columns, on which roof trusses are supported.

Fig. 2 Traditional cart sheds

Granaries were built for the storage of bagged grain. They are usually much smaller than barns, and timber-framed granaries may be supported on mushroom-shaped 'staddle stones', with the floor set well above ground level to deter vermin. They are entered through a simple doorway opening, and typically have one or two small windows high up in their walls.

Fig. 3 Traditional granary

Other Agricultural Buildings were built for a variety of uses, including storage and workshop space, and vary in size and form. They are sometimes free-standing, but sometimes form a linking range in a farmyard or an addition to another building. They are entered through simple doorway openings, and may or may not be lit by windows depending upon the use.

15.3 SETTING

An agricultural building may exist as an isolated structure in an open landscape setting, or as part of a collection of structures in a farmyard setting. Isolated structures, such as field barns, are often unenclosed, with no associated boundary treatments such as walls. A farmyard or farmstead is characterised by a group of agricultural buildings generally arranged to form an enclosed or partly enclosed courtyard space or spaces; the buildings forming ranges bound together by stone walling.

Fig. 4 Farm buildings in an agricultural context

CONVERSION PRINCIPLES

15.4 GENERAL FORM:

- The plan and massing of the building should remain substantially unaltered;
- It is generally difficult to extend or enlarge an agricultural building without causing some harm to its character; and particularly difficult in the case of extensions of conspicuously residential character. For this reason, extensions to agricultural buildings, whatever their form, are unlikely to be supported.

15.4 WALLS:

- The creation of new window and door openings should be avoided;
- Existing openings should be retained;
- Where openings need to be blocked up, a contrasting material should be used, and/ or the infill recessed into the wall;
- External pipework should be avoided;
- Repairs to existing walls should be carried out with great care, especially when re-pointing.

15.4 ROOFS:

- No alteration should be made to the pitch of the roof;
- Unbroken roof slopes should be retained, and the insertion of roof-lights minimised;
- Where roof-lights are permitted, they should be of traditional 'conservation' type, and set flush with the roof covering. They should not be used on prominent roof slopes;
- Masonry or brick chimney stacks are primarily residential features and should be avoided;
- Dormer windows and porches are also primarily residential features and should be avoided.

15.4 MATERIALS:

- Existing traditional materials should be retained and re-used;
- Artificial slates and tiles, reconstituted stone, concrete, aluminium and plastic should not generally be used;

Fig. 5 Walls and roof slopes should remain largely unbroken

Fig. 6 Existing traditional materials should be retained

- Original features and details, such as buttresses, staddle stones, lintels, owl or slit windows, mangers, hoists and date stones should all be retained.

15.4 INTERIORS:

- The open nature of most barn interiors should be preserved, and internal subdivision should be minimal;
- Roof structures, particularly roof trusses, should generally be retained without modification, and kept visible;

Fig. 7 Original roof trusses should be retained

- New first floors should be kept away from main cart openings, where the double-height space should be maintained.

15.4 SITE:

- The open nature of farmyard or courtyard groupings should always be preserved;
- The relationship between the building and surrounding landscape should be preserved;
- Residential features – such as car parking, lighting, garden spaces, sheds, patios, washing lines, climbing frames etc. – will have a detrimental effect on the character of an agricultural building and its setting, and should be avoided or minimised;

Fig. 8 Setting and curtilage are crucial aspects of character

- Boundary treatments are critical to the setting of agricultural buildings. Traditional features such as stone walling, timber post-and-rail fencing, iron estate fencing and simple barred gates can reinforce agricultural character; lap or panel fencing, some hedging, and elaborate residential style gates are likely to erode agricultural character;
- In some cases – for example, an isolated field barn – boundary treatments of any type may be inappropriate.

15.4 RESIDENTIAL CONVERSION:

- While residential conversion may be acceptable in some instances, it is important to acknowledge that it will usually entail certain compromises in terms of the treatment of the building and its site (for example, in terms of limitations to new openings or the extent of garden space) – compromises that will need to be recognised and accepted by potential owners of the property;

Fig. 9 Residential barn conversion

Fig. 10 Commercial barn conversion

- Owing to the desire for new floors, or new window and door openings that were not features of the original building, the residential conversion of barns is especially difficult to achieve without compromising agricultural character;
- Further problems include the loss of elevation unity and building integrity when farm buildings are subdivided;
- There is a general presumption against residential conversions in the open countryside, both for reasons of sustainability and also because of the impact on the wider landscape.

15.4 COMMERCIAL USES:

- Commercial uses (particularly small workshops, offices or studios (including B1 uses) are often more appropriate than residential uses, as they can often be accommodated with minimal intervention to the building and its site;
- However, issues relating to landscaping, parking, noise, fumes and traffic will still need to be carefully addressed.

15.4 RECREATION AND TOURISM:

- Recreation and tourism can also represent appropriate uses for traditional farm buildings. The open and expansive interiors of barns lend themselves to a variety of community uses, including halls, meeting rooms, wedding venues or community centres – and again, such uses can generally be achieved with only minor alterations to the building and site;
- Some traditional farm buildings can be developed as attractions in their own right – incorporating, for example, farm shops, cafés, workshops, exhibitions on farming life etc.;
- Some farm buildings may also have the potential to provide overnight accommodation, for example, holiday lets or camping barns.

15.4 BIODIVERSITY:

Unconverted agricultural buildings are often home to bats and birds. Care is needed to ensure no undue harm comes to protected wildlife species, and a bat survey, for example, may be required.